TOWARDS
STATELESS DEMOCRACY

IDEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF ROJAVA AUTONOMY
AND THE KURDISH MOVEMENT IN TURKEY

This book wouldn't become real without the support of many people, first of all Laurance Bahri and Sherman Ghazi who gave the impulse necessary to start it.

The team of The International Initiative „Freedom for Abdullah Ocalan – Peace in Kurdistan", who complied and translated the fundamental part: Democratic *Confederalism* by Abdullah Ocalan, allowed us to use their publication as a core part of this book.

Authors of the remaining texts and illustration decided to support our initiative, making their work available for free and under the open licence.

Finally, supporters of FreeLab and Rojava and our friends (online and AFK) helped us with advices and constructive critics.

We are deeply thankful for this all.

Unless marked otherwise, all materials in this book are released under Creative Commons – Attribution – Share Alike – Unported – 4.0

FreeLab Collective

https://freelab2014.wordpress.com

About us

Petros and Natasha (both in their fifties). For almost three years now we have been living "off the grid", as the full time social contributors. We run several projects, in various ways related to cooperatives and self-governance.

Our views are strongly on the side of freedom; we support the commons and the networked society. Petros is more technically oriented (hi-, low- and appropriate technology). Natasha is a professional translator, healer and counsellor. She is also a beginner gardener, in the way of Masanobu Fukuoka.

Recently we got involved into support of the Rojava Autonomy, its reconstruction and redevelopment. We also watch closely The Greek Spring – current struggle of Greeks against international plutocracy.

We are accompanied by two dogs – akitas, semi-vegetarians.

ABDULLAH OCALAN • JANET BIEHL • DILAR DIRIK • KRZYSZTOF NAWRATEK

TOWARDS STATELESS DEMOCRACY

IDEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF ROJAVA AUTONOMY AND THE KURDISH MOVEMENT IN TURKEY

The right of self-determination of the peoples includes the right to a state of their own. However, the foundation of a state does not increase the freedom of a people. The system of the United Nations that is based on nation-states has remained inefficient. Meanwhile, nation-states have become serious obstacles for any social development. Democratic confederalism is the contrasting paradigm of the oppressed people. Democratic confederalism is a non-state social paradigm. It is not controlled by a state. At the same time, democratic confederalism is the cultural organizational blueprint of a democratic nation. Democratic confederalism is based on grass-roots participation. Its decision-making processes lie with the communities. Higher levels only serve the coordination and implementation of the will of the communities that send their delegates to the general assemblies. For limited space of time they are both mouthpiece and executive institution. However, the basic power of decision rests with the local grass-roots institutions.

Abdullah Ocalan

A WORD FROM EDITORS

„Democracy only there grows, where there is a popular need of the masses. It emerges as the reaction against the voracity of State, as a necessary defence of the grass-root institutions, self-organized economical and cultural interests of the people against bureaucracy."

Edward Abramowski[1]

We weren't able to go to Kobane, to bring you first-hand stories from the front. We could only tell you the story of the siege, based on relations of others, using our knowledge and analytical skills. Today, when Kobane is free and ISIS in retreat, it is about time for you to learn how come that Rojava Autonomy emerged, what are its roots and what ideology grows out of them. It is important, as the ideals of Rojava – ideals of the whole humanity – were the reason for the defenders of Kobane to be so tough and invincible.

It started from the video clips on Youtube, showing girls with guns. Then stories about the heroic battles with ISIS. They brought a lot of emotions, but also questions: what is behind them, what drives them? Then we learned not only that 40% of Rojava armed forces are female warriors. We learned about totally separate female army – YPJ. About mandatory co-presidence on every level (except for female organizations). How could it be possible in the region which – in the eyes of the Europeans – is a stronghold of patriarchy? What is that famous *Democratic Confederalism which made Rojava possible?* What marvellous visions are needed to transgress "the one and the only" reality of the patriarchal, capitalist nation-state? We discussed it a lot within FreeLab and outside and we decided to publish a selection of texts to help our Readers to understand Rojava better – and also to look around them in a new way.

We decided to bring the ideals of Rojava closer to the European reader. To show how the Kurdish resistance movement emerged, How it transformed from a typical Marxist guerilla to the standard of quite new ideals – ideals of a cooperative society. And how – out of this very movement – the Revolution of Women bloomed, effectively creating Rojava Autonomy.

We also try to show how the thoughts of Murray Bookchin, who created and developed the libertarian municipalism movement, found

---

(1) https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edward_Abramowski

practical implementations in the mountains of Kurdistan. Obvious thought is also that it can be implemented in Poland and Europe even more easily. That is why we asked Dr Krzysztof Nawratek to show Rojava in the context of current European political thinking.

We believe deeply that democratic confederalism, as it is implemented in Rojava, is important for the whole Europe. It is an important example of implementation of a just, self-governing political system in an extremely hostile surrounding. American societies have their own example of this kind – EZLN "benevolent junta" in Chiapas, Mexico. We, in Europe, we have Rojava and their struggle for democratic confederalism.

If we manage to trigger a discussion on it and to bring it closer to the popular perception, our mission will be accomplished.

Originally, this book was published in Polish, but as we received several requests to make it available in English, here it is. Enjoy.

DEMOCRATIC CONFEDERALISM[*]
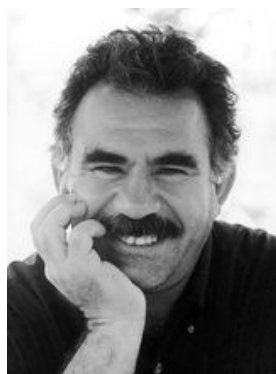
ABDULLAH OCALAN. Born in 1848. In 1970' he got involved in the struggle for freedom and equal rights for Kurds in Turkey. In 1978 he was elected a leader of PKK (Kurdistan Workers Party). In 1999 he was arested in Kenya and deported to Turkey, where he was trialed and sentenced to death. The sentence was later changed into the lifetime prison, what he serves on the Imrali Island. He is still coonsidered an undisputed leader of PKK and the major part of Kurdish movement in Turkey. He also prepared and implemented a radical change in PKK's political line, which led to creation oof the Rojava Autonomy.

PREFACE

For more than thirty years the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) has been struggling for the legitimate rights of the Kurdish people. Our struggle, our fight for liberation turned the Kurdish question into an international issue which affected the entire Middle East and brought a solution of the Kurdish question within reach.

When the PKK was formed in the 1970s the international ideological and political climate was characterized by the bipolar world of the Cold War and the conflict between the socialist and the capitalist camps. The PKK was inspired at that time by the rise of decolonialization movements all over the world. In this context we tried to find our own way in agreement with the particular situation in our homeland. The PKK never regarded the Kurdish question as a mere problem of ethnicity or nationhood. Rather, we believed, it was the project of liberating the society and democratizing it. These aims increasingly determined our actions since the 1990s.

We also recognized a causal link between the Kurdish question and the global domination of the modern capitalist system. Without questioning and challenging this link a solution would not be possible. Otherwise we would only become involved in new dependencies.

So far, with a view to issues of ethnicity and nationhood like the Kurdish question, which have their roots deep in history and at the foundations of society, there seemed to be only one viable solution: the creation of a nation-state, which was the paradigm of the capitalist modernity at that time.

---

[*] Originally published at http://www.freedom-for-ocalan.com/english/download/Ocalan-Democratic-Confederalism.pdf

We did not believe, however, that any ready-made political blueprints would be able to sustainably improve the situation of the people in the Middle East. Had it not been nationalism and nation-states which had created so many problems in the Middle East?

Let us therefore take a closer look at the historical background of this paradigm and see whether we can map a solution that avoids the trap of nationalism and fits the situation of the Middle East better.

THE NATION-STATE

BASICS

With the sedentarization of people they began to form an idea of the area that they were living in, its extension and its boundaries, which were mostly determined by nature and features of the landscape. Clans and tribes that had settled in a certain area and lived there for a long period of time developed the notions of a common identity and of the homeland. The boundaries between what the tribes saw as their homelands were not yet borders. Commerce, culture or language were not restricted by the boundaries. Territorial borders remained flexible for a long time. Feudal structures prevailed almost everywhere and now and then dynastic monarchies or great multi-ethnic empires rose with continuously changing borders and many different languages and religious communities like the Roman Empire, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Ottoman Empire or the British Empire. They survived long periods of time and many political changes because their feudal basis enabled them to distribute power flexibly over a wide range of smaller secondary power centres.

Nation-state And Power

With the appearance of the nation-state trade, commerce and finance pushed for political participation and subsequently added their power to the traditional state structures. The development of the nation-state at the beginning of the Industrial Revolution more than two hundred years ago went hand in hand with the unregulated accumulation of capital on the one hand and the unhindered exploitation of the fast growing population on the other hand. The new bourgeoisie which rose from this revolution wanted to take part in the political decisions and state structures. Capitalism, their new economic system, thus became an inherent component of the new nation-state. The nation-state needed the bourgeoisie and the power of the capital in order to replace the old feudal order and its ideology which rested on tribal

structures and inherited rights by a new national ideology which united all tribes and clans under the roof of the nation. In this way, capitalism and nation-state became so closely linked to each other that neither could be imagined to exist without the other. As a consequence of this, exploitation was not only sanctioned by the state but even encouraged and facilitated.

But above all the nation-state must be thought as the maximum form of power. None of the other types of state have such a capacity of power. One of the main reasons for this is that the upper part of the middle-class has been linked to the process of monopolization in an ever-more increasing manner. The nation-state itself is the most developed complete monopoly. It is the most developed unity of monopolies such as trade, industrial, finance and power. One should also think of ideological monopoly as an indivisible part of the power monopoly.

The State And Its Religious Roots

The religious roots of the state have already been discussed in detail (A. Ocalan, The Roots of Civilisation, London, 2007). Many contemporary political concepts and notions have their origin in religious or theological concepts or structures. In fact, a closer look reveals that religion and divine imagination brought about the first social identities in history. They formed the ideological glue of many tribes and other pre-state communities and defined their existence as communities.

Later, after state structures had already developed, the traditional links between state, power and society began to weaken. The sacred and divine ideas and practices which had been present at the origin of the community increasingly lost their meaning for the common identity and were, instead, transferred onto power structures like monarchs or dictators. The state and its power were derived from divine will and law and its ruler became king by the grace of God. They represented divine power on earth.

Today, most modern states call themselves secular, claiming that the old bonds between religion and state have been severed and that religion is no longer a part of the state. This is arguably only half the truth. Even if religious institutions or representatives of the clergy do no longer participate in political and social decision-making they still do influence these decisions to an extent just as they are influenced themselves by political or social ideas and developments. Therefore, secularism, or laicism as it is called in Turkey, still contains religious elements. The separation of state and religion is the result of a

political decision. It did not come naturally. This is why even today power and state seem to be something given, god-given we might even say. Notions like secular state or secular power remain ambiguous.

The nation-state has also allocated a number of attributes which serve to replace older religiously rooted attributes like: nation, fatherland, national flag, national anthem, and many others. Particularly notions like the unity of state and nation serve to transcend the material political structures and are, as such, reminiscent of the pre-state unity with God. They have been put in the place of the divine.

When in former times a tribe subjugated another tribe its members had to worship the gods of the victors. We may arguably call this process a process of colonization, even assimilation. The nation-state is a centralized state with quasi-divine attributes that has completely disarmed the society and monopolizes the use of force.

Bureaucracy And The Nation-State

Since the nation-state transcends its material basis, the citizens, it assumes an existence beyond its political institutions. It needs additional institutions of its own to protect its ideological basis as well as legal, economic and religious structures. The resulting ever-expanding civil and military bureaucracy is expensive and serves only the preservation of the transcendent state itself, which in turn elevates the bureaucracy above the people.

During the European modernity the state had all means at its disposal to expand its bureaucracy into all strata of the society. There it grew like cancer infecting all lifelines of the society. Bureaucracy and nation-state cannot exist without each other. If the nation-state is the backbone of the capitalist modernity it certainly is the cage of the natural society. Its bureaucracy secures the smooth functioning of the system, secures the basis of the production of goods, and secures the profits for the relevant economic actors in both the real-socialist and the business-friendly nation-state. The nation-state domesticates the society in the name of capitalism and alienates the community from its natural foundations. Any analysis meant to localize and solve social problems needs to take a close look at these links.

Nation-State And Homogeneity

The nation-state in its original form aimed at the monopolization of all social processes. Diversity and plurality had to be fought, an approach that led into assimilation and genocide. It does not only exploit the ideas and the labour potential of the society and colonize the heads of

the people in the name of capitalism. It also assimilates all kinds of spiritual and intellectual ideas and cultures in order to preserve its own existence. It aims at creating a single national culture, a single national identity, and a single unified religious community. Thus it also enforces a homogeneous citizenship. The notion of citizen has been created as a result of the quest for such a homogeneity. The citizenship of modernity defines nothing but the transition made from private slavery to state slavery. Capitalism can not attain profit in the absence of such modern slave armies. The homogenic national society is the most artificial society to have ever been created and is the result of the "social engineering project".

These goals are generally accomplished by the use of force or by financial incentives and have often resulted in the physical annihilation of minorities, cultures, or languages or in forced assimilation. The history of the last two centuries is full of examples illustrating the violent attempts at creating a nation that corresponds to the imaginary reality of a true nation-state.

Nation-State And Society

It is often said that the nation-state is concerned with the fate of the common people. This is not true. Rather, it is the national governor of the worldwide capitalist system, a vassal of the capitalist modernity which is more deeply entangled in the dominant structures of the capital than we usually tend to assume: It is a colony of the capital. Regardless how nationalist the nation-state may present itself, it serves to the same extent the capitalist processes of exploitation. There is no other explanation for the horrible redistribution wars of the capitalist modernity. Thus the nation-state is not with the common people – it is an enemy of the peoples.

Relations between other nation-states and international monopolies are coordinated by the diplomats of the nation-state. Without the recognition by other nation-states none of them could survive. The reason can be found in the logic of the worldwide capitalist system. Nation-states which leave the phalanx of the capitalist system will be overtaken by the same fate that the Saddam regime in Iraq experienced or it will be brought to its knees by means of economic embargoes.

Let us now derive some characteristics of the nation-state from the example of the Republic of Turkey.

IDEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF THE NATION-STATE

In the past the history of states was often equated with the history of their rulers, which lent them almost divine qualities. This practice changed with the rise of the nation-state. Now the entire state was idealized and elevated to a divine level.

Nationalism

Assuming that we would compare the nation-state to a living god then nationalism would be the correspondent religion. In spite of some seemingly positive elements, nation-state and nationalism show metaphysical characteristics. In this context, capitalist profit and the accumulation of capital appear as categories shrouded in mystery. There is a network of contradictory relations behind these terms that is based on force and exploitation. Their heg emonic strive for power serves the maximization of profits. In this sense, nationalism appears as a quasi-religious justification. Its true mission, however, is its service to the virtually divine nation-state and its ideological vision which pervades all areas of the society. Arts, science, and social awareness: none of them is independent. A true intellectual enlightenment therefore needs a fundamental analysis of these elements of modernity.

Positivist Science

The paradigm of a positivist or descriptive science forms another ideological pillar of the nation-state. It fuels nationalist ideology but also laicism which has taken the form of a new religion. On the other hand it is one of the ideological foundations of modernity and its dogmata have influenced the social sciences sustainably. Positivism can be circumscribed as a philosophical approach that is strictly confined to the appearance of things, which it equates with reality itself. Since in positivism appearance is reality, nothing that has no appearance can be part of reality. We know from quantum physics, astronomy, some fields of biology and even the gist of thought itself that reality occurs in worlds that are beyond observable events. The truth, in the relationship between the observed and the observer, has mystified itself to the extent that it no longer fits any physical scale or definition. Positivism denies this and thus, to an extent, resembles the idol worshipping of ancient times, where the idol constitutes the image of reality.

Sexism

Another ideological pillar of the nation-state is the sexism that pervades the entire society. Many civilized systems have employed sexism in order to preserve their own power. They enforced women's exploitation and used them as a valuable reservoir of cheap labour. Women are also regarded as a valuable resource in so far as they produce offspring and provide the reproduction of men. Thus, woman is both a sexual object and a commodity. She is a tool for the preservation of male power and can at best advance to become an accessory of the patriarchal male society. On the one hand, the sexism of the society of the nation-state strengthens the power of the men; on the other hand the nation-state turns its society into a colony by the exploitation of women. In this respect women can also be regarded as an exploited nation.

In the course of the history of civilization the patriarchy consolidated the traditional framework of hierarchies, which in the nation-state is fuelled by sexism. Socially rooted sexism is just like nationalism an ideological product of the nation-state and of power. Socially rooted sexism is not less dangerous than capitalism. The patriarchy, however, tries to hide these facts at any rate. This is understandable with a view to the fact that all power relations and state ideologies are fuelled by sexist concepts and behaviour. Without the repression of the women the repression of the entire society is not conceivable. The sexism within the nation-state society while on the one hand gives the male the maximum power on the other hand turns the society through the woman into the worst colony of all. Hence woman is the historical-society's colony nation which has reached its worst position within the nation-state. All the power and state ideologies stem from sexist attitudes and behaviour. Woman's slavery is the most profound and disguised social area where all types of slavery, oppression and colonization are realized. Capitalism and nation-state act in full awareness of this. Without woman's slavery none of the other types of slavery can exist let alone develop. Capitalism and nation-state denote the most institutionalized dominant male. More boldly and openly spoken: capitalism and nation-state are the monopolism of the despotic and exploitative male.

Religiousness

Even if it acts seemingly like a secular state, the nation-state does not shy away from using a mélange of nationalism and religion for its purposes. The reason is simple: religion still plays an important part in some societies or parts of them. In particular Islam is very agile in this respect.

However, religion in the age of modernity does no longer play its traditional role. Whether it is a radical of a moderate belief, religion in the nation-state does no longer have a mission in the society. It can only do what it is permitted by the nation-state. Its still existing influence and its functionality, which can be misused for the promotion of nationalism, are interesting aspects for the nation-state. In some cases religion even takes on the part of nationalism. The Shi'ah of Iran is one of the most powerful ideological weapons of the Iranian state. In Turkey the Sunni ideology plays a similar but more limited part.

THE KURDS AND THE NATION-STATE

After the preceding short introduction into the nation-state and its ideological basics we will now see why the foundation of a separate Kurdish nation-state does not make sense for the Kurds. Over the last decades the Kurds have not only struggled against repression by the dominant powers and for the recognition of their existence but also for the liberation of their society from the grip of feudalism. Hence it does not make sense to replace the old chains by new ones or even enhance the repression. This is what the foundation of a nation-state would mean in the context of the capitalist modernity. Without opposition against the capitalist modernity there will be no place for the liberation of the peoples. This is why the founding of a Kurdish nation-state is not an option for me.

The call for a separate nation-state results from the interests of the ruling class or the interests of the bourgeoisie but does not reflect the interests of the people since another state would only be the creation of additional injustice and would curtail the right to freedom even more.

The solution to the Kurdish question, therefore, needs to be found in an approach that weakens the capitalist modernity or pushes it back. There are historical reasons, social peculiarities and actual developments as well as the fact that the settlement area of the Kurds extends over the territories of four different countries which make a democratic solution indispensable. Furthermore, there is also the

important fact that the entire Middle East suffers from a democracy deficit. Thanks to the geostrategic situation of the Kurdish settlement area successful Kurdish democratic projects promise to advance the democratization of the Middle East in general. Let us call this democratic project democratic confederalism.

DEMOCRATIC CONFEDERALISM

This kind of rule or administration can be called a non-state political administration or a democracy without a state. Democratic decision-making processes must not be confused with the processes known from public administration. States only administrate while democracies govern. States are founded on power; democracies are based on collective consensus. Office in the state is determined by decree, even though it may be in part legitimized by elections. Democracies use direct elections. The state uses coercion as a legitimate means. Democracies rest on voluntary participation.

Democratic confederalism is open towards other political groups and factions. It is flexible, multi-cultural, anti-monopo listic, and consensus-oriented. Ecology and feminism are central pillars. In the frame of this kind of self-administration an alternative economy will become necessary, which increases the resources of the society instead of exploiting them and thus does justice to the manifold needs of the society.

PARTICIPATION AND THE DIVERSITY OF THE POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

The contradictory composition of the society necessitates political groups with both vertical and horizontal formations. Central, regional and local groups need to be balanced in this way. Only they, each for itself, are able to deal with its special concrete situation and develop appropriate solutions for far-reaching social problems. It is a natural right to express one's cultural, ethnic, or national identity with the help of political associations. However, this right needs an ethical and political society. Whether nation-state, republic, or democracy – democratic confederalism is open for compromises concerning state or governmental traditions. It allows for equal coexistence.

THE HERITAGE OF THE SOCIETY AND THE ACCUMULATION OF HISTORICAL KNOWLEDGE

Then again, democratic confederalism rests on the historical experience of the society and its collective heritage. It is not an

arbitrary modern political system but, rather, accumulates history and experience. It is the offspring of the life of the society. The state continuously orientates itself towards centralism in order to pursue the interests of the power monopolies. Just the opposite is true for confederalism. Not the monopolies but the society is at the centre of political focus. The heterogeneous structure of the society is in contradiction to all forms of centralism. Distinct centralism only results in social eruptions. Within living memory people have always formed loose groups of clans, tribes or other communities with federal qualities. In this way they were able to preserve their internal autonomy. Even the internal government of empires employed diverse methods of self-administration for their different parts, which included religious authorities, tribal councils, kingdoms, and even republics. Hence it is important to understand, that even centralist seeming empires follow a confederate organizational structure. The centralist model is not an administrative model wanted by the society. Instead, it has its source in the preservation of power of the monopolies.

ETHICS AND POLITICAL AWARENESS

The classification of the society in categories and terms after a certain pattern is produced artificially by the capitalist monopolies. What counts in a society like that is not what you are but what you appear to be. The putative alienation of the society from its own existence encourages the withdrawal from active participation, a reaction which is often called disenchantment with politics. However, societies are essentially political and value-oriented. Economic, political, ideological, and military monopolies are constructions which contradict the nature of society by merely striving for the accumulation of surplus. They do not create values. Nor can a revolution create a new society. It can only influence the ethical and political web of a society. Anything else is at the discretion of the ethics-based political society. I mentioned already that the capitalist modernity enforces the centralization of the state. The political and military power centres within the society have been deprived of their influence. The nation-state as a modern substitute of monarchy left a weakened and defenceless society behind. In this respect, legal order and public peace only imply the class rule of the bourgeoisie. Power constitutes itself in the central state and becomes one of the fundamental administrative paradigms of modernity. This puts the nation-state in contrast to democracy and republicanism. Our project of "democratic modernity" is meant as an alternative draft to modernity as we know it. It builds on democratic confederalism as a

fundamental political paradigm. Democratic modernity is the roof of an ethics-based political society. As long as we make the mistake to believe that societies need to be homogeneous monolithic entities it will be difficult to understand confederalism. Modernity's history is also a history of four centuries of cultural and physical genocide in the name of an imaginary unitary society. Democratic confederalism as a sociological category is the counterpart of this history and it rests on the will to fight if necessary as well as on ethnic, cultural, and political diversity.

The crisis of the financial system is an inherent consequence of the capitalist nation-state. However, all efforts of the neoliberals to change the nation-state have remained unsuccessful. The Middle East provides instructive examples.

DEMOCRATIC CONFEDERALISM AND A DEMOCRATIC POLITICAL SYSTEM

In contrast to a centralist and bureaucratic understanding of administration and exercise of power confederalism poses a type of political self-administration where all groups of the society and all cultural identities can express themselves in local meetings, general conventions and councils. This understanding of democracy opens the political space to all strata of the society and allows for the formation of different and diverse political groups. In this way it also advances the political integration of the society as a whole. Politics becomes a part of everyday life. Without politics the crisis of the state cannot be solved since the crisis is fuelled by a lack of representation of the political society. Terms like federalism or self administration as they can be found in liberal democracies need to be conceived anew. Essentially, they should not be conceived as hierarchical levels of the administration of the nation-state but rather as central tools of social expression and participation. This, in turn, will advance the politicization of the society. We do not need big theories here, what we need is the will to lend expression to the social needs by strengthening the autonomy of the social actors structurally and by creating the conditions for the organization of the society as a whole. The creation of an operational level where all kinds of social and political groups, religious communities, or intellectual tendencies can express themselves directly in all local decision-making processes can also be called participative democracy. The stronger the participation the more powerful is this kind of democracy. While the nation-state is in contrast to democracy, and even denies it, democratic confederalism constitutes a continuous democratic process.

The social actors, which are each for itself federative units, are the germ cells of participative democracy. They can combine and associate into new groups and confederations according to the situation. Each of the political units involved in participative democracy is essentially democratic. In this way, what we call democracy then is the application of democratic processes of decision-making from the local level to the global level in the framework of a continuous political process. This process will affect the structure of the social web of the society in contrast to the striving for homogeneity of the nation-state, a construct that can only be realized by force thus bringing about the loss of freedom.

I have already addressed the point that the local level is the level where the decisions are made. However, the thinking leading to these decisions needs to be in line with global issues. We need to become aware of the fact that even villages and urban neighbourhoods require confederate structures. All areas of the society need to be given to self-administration, all levels of it need to be free to participate.

DEMOCRATIC CONFEDERALISM AND SELF-DEFENCE

Essentially, the nation-state is a militarily structured entity. Nation-states are eventually the products of all kinds of internal and external warfare. None of the existing nation-states has come into existence all by itself. Invariably, they have a record of wars. This process is not limited to their founding phase but, rather, it builds on the militarization of the entire society. The civil leadership of the state is only an accessory of the military apparatus. Liberal democracies even outdo this by painting their militaristic structures in democratic and liberal colours. However, this does not keep them from seeking authoritarian solutions at the highpoint of a crisis caused by the system itself. Fascist exercise of power is the nature of the nation-state. Fascism is the purest form of the nation-state.

This militarization can only be pushed back with the help of self-defence. Societies without any mechanism of self-defence lose their identities, their capability of democratic decision-making, and their political nature. Therefore, the self-defence of a society is not limited to the military dimension alone. It also presupposes the preservation of its identity, its own political awareness, and a process of democratization. Only then can we talk about self-defence.

Against this background democratic confederalism can be called a system of self-defence of the society. Only with the help of confederate networks can there be a basis to oppose the global domination of the monopolies and nation-state militarism.

Against the network of monopolies we must build up an equally strong network of social confederacies.

This means in particular that the social paradigm of confederalism does not involve a military monopoly for the armed forces, which do only have the task of ensuring the internal and external security. They are under direct control of the democratic institutions. The society itself must be able to determine their duties. One of their tasks will be the defence of the free will of the society from internal and external interventions. The composition of the military leadership needs to be determined in equal terms and parts by both the political institutions and the confederate groupings.

DEMOCRATIC CONFEDERALISM VERSUS STRIFE FOR HEGEMONY

In democratic confederalism there is no room for any kind of hegemony striving. This is particularly true in the field of ideology. Hegemony is a principle that is usually followed by the classic type of civilization. Democratic civilizations reject hegemonic powers and ideologies. Any ways of expression which cut across the boundaries of democratic self-administration would carry self-administration and freedom of expression ad absurdum. The collective handling of matters of the society needs understanding, respect of dissenting opinions and democratic ways of decisionmaking. This is in contrast to the understanding of leadership in the capitalist modernity where arbitrary bureaucratic decisions of nation-state character are diametrically opposed to the democratic-confederate leadership in line with ethic foundations. In democratic confederalism leadership institutions do not need ideological legitimization. Hence, they need not strive for hegemony.

DEMOCRATIC CONFEDERATE STRUCTURES AT A GLOBAL SCALE

Although in democratic confederalism the focus is on the local level, organizing confederalism globally is not excluded. Contrariwise, we need to put up a platform of national civil societies in terms of a confederate assembly to oppose the United Nations as an association of nation-states under the leadership of the superpowers. In this way we might get better decisions with a view to peace, ecology, justice and productivity in the world.

CONCLUSION

Democratic confederalism can be described as a kind of selfadministration in contrast to the administration by the nation-

state. However, under certain circumstances peaceful coexistence is possible as long as the nation-state does not interfere with central matters of self-administration. All such interventions would call for the self-defence of the civil society.

Democratic confederalism is not at war with any nation-state but it will not stand idly by at assimilation efforts. Revolutionary overthrow or the foundation of a new state does not create sustainable change. In the long run, freedom and justice can only be accomplished within a democratic-confederate dynamic process. Neither total rejection nor complete recognition of the state is useful for the democratic efforts of the civil society. The overcoming of the state, particularly the nation-state, is a long-term process.

The state will be overcome when democratic confederalism has proved its problem-solving capacities with a view to social issues. This does not mean, though, that attacks by nation-states have to be accepted. Democratic confederations will sustain self-defence forces at all times. Democratic confederations will not be limited to organize themselves within a single particular territory. They will become cross-border confederations when the societies concerned so desire.

PRINCIPLES OF DEMOCRATIC CONFEDERALISM

1. The right of self-determination of the peoples includes the right to a state of their own. However, the foundation of a state does not increase the freedom of a people. The system of the United Nations that is based on nation-states has remained inefficient. Meanwhile, nation-states have become serious obstacles for any social development. Democratic confederalism is the contrasting paradigm of the oppressed people.

2. Democratic confederalism is a non-state social paradigm. It is not controlled by a state. At the same time, democratic confederalism is the cultural organizational blueprint of a democratic nation.

3. Democratic confederalism is based on grass-roots participation. Its decision-making processes lie with the communities. Higher levels only serve the coordination and implementation of the will of the communities that send their delegates to the general assemblies. For limited space of time they are both mouthpiece and executive institutions. However, the basic power of decision rests with the local grass-roots institutions.

4. In the Middle East, democracy cannot be imposed by the capitalist system and its imperial powers which only damage

  democracy. The propagation of grass-roots democracy is elementary. It is the only approach that can cope with diverse ethnical groups, religions, and class differences. It also goes together well with the traditional confederate structure of the society.

5. Democratic confederalism in Kurdistan is an anti-nationalist movement as well. It aims at realizing the right of self-defence of the peoples by the advancement of democracy in all parts of Kurdistan without questioning the existing political borders. Its goal is not the foundation of a Kurdish nation-state. The movement intends to establish federal structures in Iran, Turkey, Syria, and Iraq that are open for all Kurds and at the same time form an umbrella confederation for all four parts of Kurdistan.

PROBLEMS OF THE PEOPLES IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND POSSIBLE WAYS TO A SOLUTION

The national question is not a phantasm of the capitalist modernity. Nevertheless it was the capitalist modernity which imposed the national question on the society. The nation replaced the religious community. However, the transition to a national society needs the overcoming of the capitalist modernity if the nation is not to remain the disguise of repressive monopolies.

As negative as is the over-emphasis of the national category in the Middle East as severe would be the consequences of neglecting the collective national aspect. Hence the method in handling the issue should not be ideological but scientific and not nation-statist but based on the concept of democratic nation and democratic communalism. The contents of such an approach are the fundamental elements of democratic modernity.

Over the past two centuries nationalism and tendency for nation-states have been fuelled in the societies of the Middle East. The national issues have not been solved but rather have been aggravated in all areas of the society. Instead of cultivating productive competition the capital enforces internal and external wars in the name of the nation-state.

The theory of communalism would be an alternative to capitalism. In the framework of democratic nations which do not strive for power monopolies it may lead to peace in a region which has only been the field of gory wars and genocides.

In this context we can speak of four majority nations: Arabs, Persians, Turks, and Kurds. I do not wish to divide nations into majority or minority as I do not find this to be appropriate. But due to demographic considerations I shall speak of majority nations. In the same context we may also use the term minority nations.

1. There are more than twenty Arab nation-states which divide the Arab community and damage their societies by wars. This is one of the main factors responsible for the alienation of cultural values and the apparent hopelessness of the Arab national question. These nation-states have not even been able to form a cross-national economic community. They are the main reason of the problematic situation of the Arab nation. A religiously motivated tribal nationalism together with a sexist patriarchal society pervades all areas of the society resulting in distinct conservatism and slavish obedience. Nobody believes that the Arabs will be able to find an Arab national solution to their internal and crossnational problems. However, democratization and a communalist approach might provide such a solution. Their weakness towards Israel, which the Arab nation-states regard as a competitor, is not only the result of international support by the hegemonic powers. Rather, it is the result of a strong internal democratic and communal institutions within Israel. Over the last century, the society of the Arab nation has been weakened by radical nationalism and Islamism. Yet, if they are able to unite communal socialism which they are not a stranger to with that of the understanding of a democratic nation then they may be able to find themselves a secure, long-term solution.

2. The Turks and Turkmens form another influential nation. They share a similar understandings of power and ideology with the Arabs. They are strict nation-statists and have a profound religious and racial nationalism engraved in them. From a sociological point of view, the Turks and Turkmens are quite different. The relations between Turkmen and Turkish aristocracy resemble the tensed relations between Bedouins and Arab aristocracy. They form a stratum whose interests are compatible with democracy and communalism. The national problems are quite complex.

The power strive of the nation-state, distinct nationalism and a sexist patriarchal society prevail and create a very conservative society. The family is regarded as the smallest cell of the state. Both individuals and institutions have taken in these aspects. Turkish and Turkmen communities struggle for power. Other ethnic groups are subjected to a distinct policy of subjugation. The centralist power structures of the Turkish nation-state and the rigid official ideology have prevented a solution to the Kurdish question until today. The society is made to

believe that there is no alternative to the state. There is no balance between the individual and the state. Obedience is regarded as the greatest virtue.

In contrast to this, the theory of the democratic modernity offers an adequate approach to all national communities in Turkey to solve their national problems. Community based project of a democratic Turkish confederation would both strengthen its internal unity and and create the conditions for a peaceful coexistence with the neighbours that it lives with. Borders have lost its former meaning when it comes to social unity. In spite of geographic boundaries today's modern communication tools allow for a virtual unity between individuals and communities wherever they are. A democratic confederation of the Turkish national communities could be a contribution to world peace and the system of democratic modernity.

3. The Kurdish national society is very complex. Worldwide, the Kurds are the biggest nation without a state of their own. They have been settling in their present settlement areas since the Neolithic. Agriculture and stock breeding as well as their readiness to defend themselves using the geographic advantages of their mountainous homeland helped the Kurds to survive as a native people. The Kurdish national question rises from the fact that they have been denied their right to nationhood. Others tried to assimilate them, annihilate them, and in the end flatly denied their existence. Not having a state of their own has advantages and disadvantages. The excrescences of state-based civilizations have only been taken in to a limited extent. This can be a benefit in the realization of alternative social concepts beyond the capitalist modernity. Their settlement area is divided by the national borders of four countries and lies in a geo-strategically important region, thus providing the Kurds a strategic advantage. The Kurds do not have the chance to form a national society through the use of state-power. Although there is a Kurdish political entity today in Iraqi-Kurdistan, it is not a nation-state but rather a parastatal entity.

Kurdistan had also been home to Armenian and Aramaic minorities before these fell victims to genocides. There are also smaller groups of Arabs and Turks. Even today there are many different religions and faiths living side by side there. There also rudiments of a clan and tribal culture while there is almost no presence of urban culture there.

All these properties are a blessing for new democratic political formations. Communal cooperatives in farming but also in the water economy and the energy sector offer themselves as ideal ways of production. The situation is also favourable for the development of an

ethical political society. Even the patriarchal ideology is less deeply rooted here than in the neighbouring societies. This is beneficial for the establishment of a democratic society where women's freedom and equality are to form one of the main pillars. It also offers the conditions for the creation of a democratic environment-friendly nation in line with the paradigm of the democratic modernity. The construction of a democratic nation based on multi-national identities is the ideal solution when faced with the dead-end street nation-state. The emerging entity could become a blueprint for the entire Middle East and expand dynamically into neighbouring countries. Convincing the neighbouring nations of this model shall change the fate of the Middle East and shall reinforce the chance of democratic modernity to create an alternative. In this sense, therefore, the freedom of the Kurds and the democratization of their society would be synonymous with the freedom of the whole region and its societies.

4. The reasons for today's problems of the Persian or Iranian nation can be found in the interventions of historical civilizations and the capitalist modernity. Although their original identity was a result of Zoroastrian and Mithraic tradition these have been annulled by a derivative of Islam. Manichaeism that emerged as the synthesis of Judaism, Christianity and Mohammedanism with Greek philosophy was not able to prevail against the ideology of the official civilization. Indeed, it went no further then to nurture the tradition of rebellion. It has hence converted the Islamic tradition into Shi'ah denomination and adopted it to be its latest civilizational ideology. Presently there are efforts made to modernize itself by passing the elements of capitalist modernity through its Shi'ah filter.

The Iranian society is multi-ethnic and multi-religious and blessed with a rich culture. All national and religious identities of the Middle East can be found there. This diversity is in strong contrast to the hegemonic claim of the theocracy, which cultivates a subtle religious nationalism and the ruling class does not shrink back from anti-modernist propaganda whenever it serves their interests. Revolutionary and democratic tendencies have been integrated by the traditional civilization. A despotic regime skilfully governs the country. The negative effects of American and European sanctions are not negligible here.

Despite strong centralist efforts in Iran, from the grass-roots already some kind of federalism exists. When elements of demo cratic civilisation and federalist elements including Azeris, Kurds, Baluchis, Arabs, and Turkmens intersect, the project of a "Democratic Confederation of Iran" can emerge and become attractive. Women's movement and communal traditions will play a special role here.

5. The Armenian national question contains one of the greatest tragedies that the progress of the capitalist modernity has brought about in the Middle East. The Armenians are a very old people. They shared much of their settlement area with the Kurds. While the Kurds live primarily on agriculture and animal husbandry the Armenians engaged in arts and crafts. Just like the Kurds, the Armenians cultivated a tradition of self-defence. Apart from some short episodes the Armenians never successfully founded a state. They rely on Christian culture which gives them their identity and their faith in salvation. Because of their religion they often suffered repression at the hands of the Muslim majority. Hence, the emerging nationalism bore fruit with the Armenian bourgeoisie. Soon there were differences with the Turkish nationalists eventually ending in the genocide of the Armenians by the Turks. Apart from the Jews the Armenians are the second-largest people which live primarily in the Diaspora. The foundation of an Armenian state in the west of Azerbaijan, however, did not solve the Armenian national question. The consequences of the genocide can hardly be put into words. The search for the lost country defines their national psyche and is at the heart of the Armenian question. The issue is aggravated by the fact that these areas have been settled by other people since then. Any concepts based on a nation-state cannot offer a solution. There is neither a homogenous population structure there nor any clear borders as is required by the capitalist modernity. The thinking of their opponents may be fascist; however, it is not enough to only bring the genocide to one's mind. Confederate structures could be an alternative for the Armenians. The foundation of a democratic Armenian nation in line with the paradigm of the democratic modernity promises the Armenians an opportunity to reinvent themselves. It could enable them to return to their place in the cultural plurality of the Middle East. In the event that they renew themselves under the Armenian democratic nation not only shall they continue to play their historical role within the Middle East culture but they shall also find the right path to liberation.

6. In modern times the Christian Arameans (Assyrians) also suffered the fate of the Armenians. They too are one of the oldest people in the Middle East. They shared a settlement area with the Kurds but also with other people. Like the Armenians they suffered from repression by the Muslim majority paving the way for European-style nationalism among the Aramean bourgeoisie. Eventually the Arameans too fell victims to genocide at the hands of the Turks under the leadership of the fascist Committee of Unity and Progress. The collaborationist Kurds lent a helping hand in this genocide. The question of Aramean

national society has its roots in the civilization but has also developed further with Christianity and ideologies of modernity. For a solution there is a need for a radical transformation of the Arameans. Their real salvation may be to break away from the mentality of classical civilization and capitalist modernity and instead embrace democratic civilization and renew their rich cultural memory as an element of democratic modernity in order to re-construct themselves as the "Aramean Democratic Nation".

7. The history of the Jewish people also gives expression to the overall problematic cultural history of the Middle East. The search for the backdrop of expulsion, pogroms and genocide amounts to balancing the accounts of the civilizations. The Jew ish community has taken up the influences of the old Sumerian and Egyptian cultures as well as those of regional tribal cultures. It has contributed a lot to the culture of the Middle East. Like the Arameans they fell victims to extreme developments of modernity. Against this background, intellectuals of Jewish descent developed a complex point of view towards these issues. However, this is by far not enough. For a solution of the problems as they exist today a renewed appropriation of the history of the Middle East is needed on a democratic basis. The Israeli nation-state is at war since its foundation. The slogan is: an eye for an eye. Fire cannot be fought by fire, though. Even if Israel enjoys relative security thanks to its international support, this is not a sustainable solution. Nothing will be permanently safe as long as the capitalist modernity has not been overcome.

The Palestine conflict makes it clear that the nation-state paradigm is not helpful for a solution. There has been much bloodshed; what remains is the difficult legacy of seemingly irresolvable problems. The Israel-Palestine example shows the complete failure of the capitalist modernity and the nation-state. The Jews belong to the culture bearers of the Middle East. Denial of their right to existence is an attack on the Middle East as such. Their transformation into a democratic nation just as for Armenians and Arameans would make their participation in a democratic confederation of the Middle East easier. The project of an "East-Aegean Democratic Confederation" would be a positive start. Strict and exclusive national and religious identities may evolve into flexible and open identities under this project. Israel may also evolve into a more acceptable open democratic nation. Undoubtedly though its neighbours must also go through such a transformation.

Tensions and armed conflicts in the Middle East make a transformation of the paradigm of modernity seem inevitable. Without it a solution of the difficult social problems and national questions is

impossible. Democratic modernity offers an alternative to the system that is unable to resolve problems.

8. The annihilation of Hellenic culture in Anatolia is a loss that cannot be compensated. The ethnic cleansing arranged by the Turkish and Greek nation-states in the first quarter of the last century has left its mark. No state has the right to drive people from their ancestral cultural region. Nevertheless, the nation-states showed their inhuman approach towards such issues again and again. The attacks on the Hellenic, Jewish, Aramean and Armenian cultures were stepped up while Islam spread throughout the Middle East. This, in turn, contributed to the decline of the Middle-Eastern Civilization. The Islamic culture has never been able to fill the emerging void. In the 19th century when the capitalist modernity advanced into the Middle East it found a cultural desert created by self-inflicted cultural erosion. Cultural diversity also strengthens the defence mechanism of a society. Monocultures are less robust. Hence, the conquest of the Middle East had not been difficult. The project of a homogeneous nation as propagated by the nation-states furthered their cultural decline.

9. The Caucasian ethnic groups also have social problems which are not insignificant. Again and again they have migrated into the Middle East and stimulated its cultures. They have unquestionably contributed to its cultural wealth. The arrival of modernity almost made these minority cultures disappear. They, too, would find their adequate place in a confederate structure. Finally, let me state again that the fundamental problems of the Middle East are deeply rooted in the class civilization. They have tightened with the global crisis of the capitalist modernity. This modernity and its claim to dominance cannot offer any solutions not to mention a long-term perspective for the Middle-East region. The future is democratic confederalism.

BOOKCHIN, ÖCALAN, AND THE DIALECTICS OF DEMOCRACY*

JANET BIEHL was the companion and collaborator of Murray Bookchin from 1987 until his death in 2006. She is the author of The Politics of Social Ecology: Libertarian Municipalism (1997) and numerous articles on social ecology. She edited The Murray Bookchin Reader (1998). Her biography of Bookchin, titled Ecology or Catastrophe, will be published by Oxford University Press in September 2015.

In February 1999, at the moment when Abdullah Öcalan was abducted in Kenya, Murray Bookchin was living with me in Burlington, Vermont. We watched Öcalan's capture on the news reports. He sympathized with the plight of the Kurds – he said so whenever the subject came up – but he saw Öcalan as yet another Marxist-Leninist guerrilla leader, a latter-day Stalinist. Murray had been criticizing such people for decades, for misleading people's impulses toward freedom into authority, dogma, statism, and even – all appearances to the contrary – acceptance of capitalism.

A STALINIST TURNED ECOLOGIST**

Bookchin himself had been a Stalinist back in the 1930s, as young teenager; he left late in the decade and joined the Trotskyists. At the time, the Trotskyists thought World War II would end in proletarian socialist revolutions in Europe and the United States, the way World War I had given rise to the Russian Revolution. During the war Bookchin worked hard in a foundry to try to organize the workers to rise up and make that revolution. But in 1945 they did not. The Trotskyist movement, its firm prediction unfulfilled, collapsed. Many if not most of its members gave up on Marxism and revolutionary politics generally; they became academics or edited magazines, working more or less within the system.

Bookchin too gave up on Marxism, since the proletariat had clearly turned out not be revolutionary after all. But instead of going mainstream, he and his friends did something unusual: they

---

remained social revolutionaries. They recalled that Trotsky, before his assassination in 1940, had said that should the unthinkable happen – should the war not end in revolution – then it would be necessary for them to rethink Marxist doctrine itself. Bookchin and his friends got together, meeting every week during the 1950s, and looked for ways to renovate the revolutionary project, under new circumstances.

Capitalism, they remained certain, was an inherently, self-destructively flawed system. But if not the proletariat, then what was its weak point? Bookchin realized, early in the 1950s, that its fatal flaw was the fact that it was in conflict with the natural environment, destructive both of nature and of human health. It industrialized agriculture, tainting crops and by extension people with toxic chemicals; it inflated cities to unbearably large, megalopolitan size, cut off from nature, that turned people into automatons and damaged both their bodies and their psyches. It pressured them through advertising to spend their money on useless commodities, whose production further harmed the environment. The crisis of capitalism, then, would result not from the exploitation of the working class but from the intolerable dehumanization of people and the destruction of nature.

To create an ecological society, cities would have to be decentralized, so people could live at a smaller scale and govern themselves and grow food locally and use renewable energy. The new society would be guided, not by the dictates of the market, or by the imperatives of a state authority, but by people's decisions. Their decisions would be guided by ethics, on a communal scale. To create such a rational, ecological society it, we would need viable institutions – what he called "forms of freedom." Both the revolutionary organization and the institutions for the new society would have to be truly liberatory, so they would not lead to a new Stalin, to yet another tyranny in the name of socialism. Yet they would have to be strong enough to suppress capitalism.

Those institutions, he realized, could only be democratic assemblies. The present nation-state would have to be eliminated and its powers devolve to citizens in assemblies. They, rather than the masters of industry could make decisions, for example about the environment. And since assemblies only worked in a locality, in order to function at a broader geographical area, they would have to band together – to confederate. He spent the next decades elaborating these ideas for an ecological, democratic society. In the 1980s, for example, he said the confederation of citizens assemblies would form a counter-power or a dual power against the nation-state. He called this program libertarian municipalism, later using the word communalism.

During those decades he tried to persuade other American and European leftists of the importance of this project. But in those days most of them were too busy admiring Mao, Ho Chi Minh, Fidel Castro. Bookchin pointed out that they were dictators; leftists didn't want to hear such criticisms. Ecology and democracy are just petite-bourgeois ideas, they told him. The only people who listened to Bookchin were anarchists, because his ideas were anti-statist. He had become, in fact, a high-profile anarchist.

He told the anarchists that his program for libertarian municipalism was their natural politics, their obvious revolutionary theory. They would listen to him respectfully, but then they'd tell him they didn't like local government any more than they liked any other kind; and they objected to majority voting, because it meant the minority wouldn't get their way. They preferred nonpolitical communitarian groups, cooperatives, radical bookstores, communes. Bookchin thought such institutions were fine, but to make a serious revolution, you needed a way to gain active, concrete, vested, structural, legal political power. Libertarian municipalism was a way to do that, to get a firm toehold against the nation-state.

He wooed the anarchists. He courted, pleaded with, wheedled, begged, intoned, and scolded them. He did everything to persuade them that libertarian municipalism was the way to make anarchism politically relevant. But by 1999 – around the time of Öcalan's arrest--he was finally admitting that he had failed, and he was in the process of disengaging from anarchism.

TO CUT THE MESSENGER'S HEAD

With all that going on, we didn't read much about Öcalan's defense at his trial, on charges of treason: we didn't know, for example, that he was undergoing a transformation similar to the one Bookchin had undergone half a century earlier, that he was rejecting Marxism-Leninism in favor of democracy. He had concluded that Marxism was authoritarian and dogmatic and unable to creatively approaching current problems.[1] We "must respond to the requirements of the historical moment," he told the prosecutors. To move forward, it was necessary "to reassess principles, the programme and the mode of action."[2] It was something Bookchin might have said in 1946.

Today, Öcalan told his Turkish prosecutors, rigid systems are collapsing, and "national, cultural, ethnic, religious, linguistic, and

(1) Abdullah Öcalan, *Declaration on the Democratic Solution of the Kurdish Question,* 1999, trans. Kurdistan Information Centre (London: Mespotamian Publishers, 1999), p. 106.
(2) Ibid., p. 44.

indeed regional problems are being solved by granting and applying the broadest democratic standards."[1] The PKK, he said, must give up its goal of achieving a separate Kurdish state and adopt a democratic program for Turkey as a whole.

Democracy, he said, is the key to the Kurdish question, because in a democratic system, each citizen has rights and a vote, and everyone participates equally regardless of ethnicity. The Turkish state could be democratized, to acknowledge the existence of the Kurdish people and their rights to language and culture.[2] It wasn't assembly democracy, such as Bookchin was advocating – it was a top-down approach. Rather, "the goal is a democratic republic."[3]

Democracy, he pointed out, was also the key to Turkey's future, since Turkey could not really be a democracy without the Kurds. Other democratic countries had resolved their ethnic problems by including once-marginalized groups – and the inclusiveness and diversity made them stronger. The United States, India, many other places with ethnic issues more complex than Turkey's had made progress on ethnic inclusion and been all the stronger for it. Around the world, acceptance turned differences into strengths. Whatever the Turkish prosecutors might have thought of this message, they didn't care for the messenger – they convicted him and sentenced him to death, a sentence later commuted to solitary confinement.

THE BEST ANARCHIST IS A FORMER MARXIST

Bookchin used to say that the best anarchists are the ones who were formerly Marxists. They knew how to think, he said, how to draw out the logic of ideas. And they understood dialectics. He would surely have recognized this ability in Öcalan, had they met. Both men shared a dialectical cast of mind, inherited from their common Marxist past. Not that they were dialectical materialists – both understood that that Marxist concept was inadequate, because historical causation is multiple, not just economic. But both remained dialectical: in love with history's developmental processes.

Dialectics is a way of describing change – not kinetic kind of change that is the concern of physics, but the developmental change that occurs in organic life and in social history. Change progresses through contradictions. In any given development, some of the old is preserved while some of the new is added, resulting in an Aufhebung, or transcendence. Both men were prone to think in terms of historical

(1) Ibid., p. 55.
(2) Ibid., p. 89-90.
(3) Ibid., p. 114.

development. Indeed, they wrote sweeping historical accounts of civilization, more than once, several times, parsing the dialectics of domination and resistance, of states and tyrannies countered by struggles for freedom. Unlike Marxists, they didn't use dialectics to predict some inevitable future revolt – they knew it could not predict. Instead, they used it to raise possibilities, to identify potentialities, to establish the historical foundations for what they thought should be the next political step. They used it, consciously or not, for ethics – to derive, from what has happened in the past, what ought to come next.

Both wrote, separately, about the origins of civilization: about primal societies in the Paleolithic; about the rise of agriculture and private property and class society; the rise of religion; of administration, states, armies, and empires, of monarchs and nobility and feudalism. And they discussed modernity, the rise of the Enlightenment, science, technology, industrialism, capitalism. Just for convenience, I'm going to call these historical accounts Civilization Narratives.

Bookchin wrote two major Civilization Narratives: The Ecology of Freedom (1982) and Urbanization Against Cities (1986).[1] Öcalan wrote several, such as The Roots of Civilization and parts of The PKK and the Kurdish Question and even the more recent Road Map.[2]

A Revolutionary City – a City Revolution

They harnessed their Civilization Narratives to serve current political problematics. The Ecology of Freedom is, among other things, an argument against mainstream, reformist environmentalists, in favor radical social ecology. Bookchin wanted to show these cautious liberals that they could aim for more than mere state reforms – that they should and could think in terms of achieving an ecological society. People lived communally in the past, and they could do so again.

So he highlighted the early preliterate societies in human history that he called "organic society," tribal, communal and non-hierarchical, living in cooperation with each other. He identified the specific features that made them cooperative: the means of life were

---

(1) Murray Bookchin, *The Ecology of Freedom: The Rise and Dissolution of Hierarchy* (Palo Alto, Calif.: Cheshire Books, 1982); and *The Rise of Urbanization and the Decline of Citizenship* [later retitled *Urbanization Against Cities*] (San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1986).

(2) Abdullah Öcalan, *Prison Writings: The Roots of Civilization,* trans. Klaus Happel (London: Pluto Press, 2007); and *Prison Writings: The PKK and the Kurdish Question in the 21st Century,* trans. Klaus Happel (London: Transmedia, 2011). Neither Bookchin nor Öcalan was an archaeologist or anthropologist; rather, in their accounts of prehistory and early history, they use such professionals' published findings.

distributed according to customs of usufruct (use of resources as needed), complementarity (ethical mutuality), and the irreducible minimum (the right of all to food, shelter, and clothing).[1] "From this feeling of unity between the individual and the community emerges a feeling of unity between the community and its environment," he wrote; these organic societies lived in harmony with the natural world.[2]

He then traced a dialectical development: the rise of hierarchy, immanently, out of organic society: patriarchy and the domination of women; gerontocracy; shamans and priests; warriors and chiefs and states; class society.[3] Thereafter the idea of dominating nature arose, re-conceiving nature as an object to be exploited. For Bookchin, hierarchy's legacy of domination is countered by a longstanding legacy of freedom – resistance movements throughout history that have embodied principles from organic society – usufruct, complementarity, the irreducible minimum. The potential still remains for a dialectical transcendence of domination in a free cooperative society that could make possible a cooperative relationship with nature. He called this set of ideas social ecology.

That was 1982. In a second Civilization Narrative, Urbanization Without Cities, he sought to establish the historical foundations for assembly democracy. He found a tradition of citizens' assemblies especially in the ancient Athenian ecclesia; in early towns of Italy and Germany and the Low countries; in the Russian veche of Pskov and Novgorod; in the comuñero assemblies of sixteenth-century Spain; in the assemblies of the revolutionary Parisian sections of 1793; the committees and councils of the American revolution; the Parisian clubs of 1848; in the Paris Commune of 1871; the soviets of 1905 and 1917; the collectives of revolutionary Spain in 1936-37; and the New England town meeting today, among others. He showed how (contrary to Marxism) the venue for revolution was not the factory but the municipality. Urbanization laid out the dialectical foundations for a municipalist revolt for freedom against the nation-state.

LIVING IN A ZIGGURAT

Confined to solitude in his island prison, Öcalan dedicated himself to study and writing, often Civilization Narratives. One of his problematics, in Roots of Civilization (2001), was to show the need for Turkey's democratic republic to include the Kurds. He too described a

(1) Bookchin, *Ecology of Freedom,* chap. 2.
(2) Ibid., pp. 46, 43.
(3) Ibid., chap. 3.

process of social evolution, the historical macro-processes of civilization, whose roots lay in Mesopotamia, at Sumer.

In his telling, the Ziggurat – a temple, an administrative center, and a production site – was "the womb of state institutions."[1] The topmost floor was said to be the home of the gods, but the first floor was for the production and storage of goods. The temple thus functioned as a center of economic production. Rulers were elevated to divine status; the rest of the people had to toil in their service, as workers in a temple-centered economy. The ziggurats were "the laboratories for the encoding of human mindsets, the first asylums were the submissive creature was created." They were "the first patriarchal households and the first brothels." The Sumerian priests who constructed them became "the foremost architects of centralised political power." Their temples grew into cities, cities became states, and empires, and civilization. But the nature of the phenomenon remained the same: "The history of civilization amounts to nothing else than the continuation of a Sumerian society grown in extension, branched out and diversified, but retaining the same basic configuration."[2] We are still living in Sumer, still living in "this incredible intellectual invention" that "has been controlling our entire history ever since."[3] If Sumerian civilization is the thesis, he said dialectically, we need an antithesis, which we can find in, among other places, the Kurdish question.[4] Ethnic resistance to the Sumerian city is ancient as that city itself. Today a transcendence of the Sumerian state may be found in a fully democratic republic, home to both Kurds and Turks.

PARALLEL STORIES

I don't know anything about Öcalan's other intellectual influences – the names Wallerstein, Braudel, and Foucault are often mentioned. But it's clear that in 2002 Öcalan started reading Bookchin intensively, especially Ecology of Freedom and Urbanization Without Cities. Thereafter, through his lawyers, he began recommending Urbanization Without Cities to all mayors in Turkish Kurdistan and Ecology of Freedom to all militants[5].

---

(1) Öcalan, *Roots,* p. 6.

(2) Ibid., p. 53, 25, 98.

(3) Öcalan*, PKK and Kurdish Question,* p. 96

(4)   Unlike Öcalan, Bookchin chose not to use the terms *thesis, antithesis,* and *synthesis,* considering them an oversimplification of Hegel's triad *an sich, für sich,* and *an und für sich.*

(5) So I was told by the intermediary between Öcalan's lawyers and Bookchin, who wishes to remain anonymous here.

In the spring of 2004, he had his lawyers contact Murray, which they did through an intermediary, who explained to Murray that Öcalan considered himself his student, had acquired a good understanding of his work, and was eager to make the ideas applicable to Middle Eastern societies. He asked for a dialogue with Murray and sent one of his manuscripts.

It would have been amazing, had that dialogue taken place. Unfortunately Murray, at eighty-three, was too sick to accept the invitation and reluctantly, respectfully declined. Öcalan's subsequent writings show the influence of his study of Bookchin. His 2004 work In Defense of the People is a Civilization Narrative that includes an account of primal communal social forms, like Murray's "organic society," the communal form of life that Öcalan renamed "natural society." In natural society, he wrote, people lived "as part of nature," and "human communities were part of the natural ecology." He presented an account of the rise of hierarchy that much resembled Bookchin's: the state "enforced hierarchy permanently and legitimized the accumulation of values and goods." Moreover, he said, the rise of hierarchy introduced the idea of dominating nature: "Instead of being a part of nature," hierarchical society saw "nature increasingly as a resource." Öcalan even called attention to the process's dialectical nature: "natural society at the beginning of humankind forms the thesis contrasted by the antithesis of the subsequent hierarchic and state-based forms of society."[1]

Their respective Civilization Narratives have many points of overlap and difference that would be fascinating to explore, but in the interests of conciseness, I'll limit myself to one, the various ways they wrote about Mesopotamia.

Öcalan, as I've said, emphasized that Mesopotamia was where civilization began. Bookchin agreed, noting that writing began there: "cuneiform writing (...) had its origins in the meticulous records the temple clerks kept of products received and products of dispersed." Later "these ticks on clay tablets" became "narrative forms of script," a progressive development.[2] He agreed that hierarchy, priesthoods, and states began at Sumer, although he thought ancient Mesoamerican civilizations underwent a parallel development. But what seems to have been most compelling to him was the traces of resistance: in Sumer, "the earliest 'city-states' were managed by 'equalitarian

---

(1)   Abdullah Öcalan, *In Defense of the People* (unpublished), chap. 1.2, "The Natural Society," English translation manuscript courtesy of the International Initiative Freedom for Öcalan, Peace in Kurdistan. This book was published in German as *Jenseits von Staat, Macht, und Gewalt* (Neuss: Mesopotamien Verlag, 2010).

(2)   Bookchin, *Ecology of Freedom*, p. 144.

assemblies,' which possessed 'freedom to an uncommon degree.'"[1]After the rise of kingship "there is evidence of popular revolts, possibly to restore the old social dispensation or to diminish the authority of the bala [king]." Even "the governing ensi, or military overlords, were repeatedly checked by popular assemblies."[2]

And it fascinated him that it was at Sumer that the word freedom (amargi) appeared for the first time in recorded history: in a Sumerian cuneiform tablet that gives an account of a successful popular revolt against a regal tyranny.[3]

Öcalan, after reading Bookchin, noted the use of the word amargi, but otherwise didn't pick up on this point. But he did trace traits of Kurdish society to the Neolithic: "many characteristics and traits of Kurdish society," he said, especially the "mindset and material basis, … bear a resemblance to communities from the Neolithic."[4] Even today Kurdish society bears the cooperative features of organic society: "Throughout their whole history Kurds have favoured Clan systems and tribal confederations and struggled to resist centralised governments."[5] They are potentially bearers of freedom.

---

(1) Ibid., p. 129. He is drawing on the work of Henri Frankfort and Samuel Noah Kramer.

(2) Ibid., p. 95.

(3) Ibid., p. 168.

(4) Öcalan, *PKK and Kurdish Question,* p. 22.

(5) Öcalan, "The Declaration of Democratic Confederalism," February 4, 2005, online at http://www.kurdmedia.com/article.aspx?id=10174 .

A PRINCIPLE OF HOPE

As Marxists, Bookchin and Öcalan had both been taught that the dialectical-materialist processes of history are inexorable and function like laws, with inevitable outcomes, like the rise of the nation-state and capitalism. But in The Ecology of Freedom, the ex-Marxist Bookchin was at pains to discredit "such notions of social law and teleology." Not only had they been used "to achieve a ruthless subjugation of the individual to supra-human forces beyond human control" – as in Stalinism; they denied "the ability of human will and individual choice to shape the course of social events."[1] They render us captive to a belief in "economic and technical inexorability." In fact, he argued, even the rise of hierarchy was not inevitable, and if we put aside the idea that it was, we may have "a vision that significantly alters our image of a liberated future."[2] That is, we lived communally once, and we could live communally again. The buried memory of organic society "functions unconsciously with an implicit commitment to freedom."[3] I think that is the underlying, liberatory insight of The Ecology of Freedom.

Reading Öcalan's In Defense of the People, I sensed an exhilaration that reminded me of how I felt when I first read Ecology of Freedom back in 1985 – delighted by the insight that people once lived in communal solidarity, and that the potential for it remains, and inspired by the prospect that we could have it again, if we chose to change our social arrangements. The concept of the "irreducible minimum" simply has taken new names, like socialism. Ecology of Freedom offers to readers what Murray used to call "a principle of hope," and that must have meant something to the imprisoned Öcalan.

"The victory of capitalism was not simply fate," Öcalan wrote in 2004. "There could have been a different development." To regard capitalism and the nation-state as inevitable "leaves history to those in power." Rather, "there is always only a certain probability for things to happen … there is always an option of freedom.[4]

The communal aspects of "natural society" persist in ethnic groups, class movements, and religious and philosophical groups that struggle for freedom. "Natural society has never ceased to exist," he wrote. A dialectical conflict between freedom and domination has persisted throughout western history, "a constant battle between democratic

---

(1) Bookchin, *Ecology of Freedom*, pp. 23-24.

(2) Ibid., p. 67.

(3) Ibid., p. 143.

(4) Öcalan, *Defense of People,* p. 41.

elements who refer to communal structures and those whose instruments are power and war." For "the communal society is in permanent conflict with the hierarchic one."[1]

Finally, Öcalan embraced social ecology. "The issue of social ecology begins with civilization," he wrote in 2004, because "the roots of civilization" are where we find also "the beginnings of the destruction of the natural environment." Natural society was in a sense ecological society. The same forces that destroy society from within also cut the meaningful link to nature. Capitalism, he says, is anti-ecological, and we need a specifically ethical revolt against it, "a conscious ethic effort," a "new social ethics that is in harmony with traditional values." The liberation of women is fundamental. And he called for a "democratic-ecological society," by which he meant "a moral-based system that involves sustainable dialectical relations with nature, … where common welfare is achieved by means of direct democracy."[2]

THE KURDS AGAINST SUMER

How did it all apply to the Kurdish question? Once again, he emphasizes that achieving Kurdish freedom means achieving freedom for everyone. "Any solution will have to include options not only valid for the Kurdish people but for all people. That is, I am approaching these problems based on one humanism, one humanity, one nature and one universe."[3] But now, instead of through the democratic republic, it is to be achieved through assembly democracy.

"Our first task," he wrote, "is to push for democratization, for non-state structures, and communal organization." Instead of focusing solely on changing the Turkish constitution, he advocated that Kurds create organizations at the local level: local town councils, municipal administrations, down to urban districts, townships, and villages. They should form new local political parties and economic cooperatives, civil society organizations, and those that address human rights, women's rights, children's rights, animal rights, and all other issues to be addressed.

"Regional associations of municipal administrations" are needed, so these local organizations and institutions would form a network. At the topmost level, they are to be represented in a "General Congress of the People," which will address issues of "politics, self-defense, law,

---

(1) Ibid., pp. 51, 65, 60.
(2) Ibid., chap. III.4.
(3) Ibid., p. 52.

morality, economy, science, arts, and welfare by means of institutionalization, rules and control mechanisms."

Gradually, as the democratic institutions spread, all of Turkey would undergo a democratization. They would network across existing national borders, to accelerate the advent of democratic civilization in the whole region and produce not only freedom for the Kurds but a geopolitical and cultural renewal. Ultimately a democratic confederal union would embrace the whole of the Middle East. He named this Kurdish version of libertarian municipalism "democratic confederalism."

In March 2005, Öcalan issued a Declaration of Democratic Confederalism in Kurdistan. It called for "a grass-roots democracy … based on the democratic communal structure of natural society." It "will establish village, towns and city assemblies and their delegates will be entrusted with the real decision-making, which in effect means that the people and the community will decide." Öcalan's democratic confederalism preserves his brilliant move of linking the liberation of Kurds to the liberation of humanity. It affirms individual rights and freedom of expression for everyone, regardless of religious, ethnic, and class differences. It "promotes an ecological model of society" and supports women's liberation. He urged this program upon his people: "I am calling upon all sectors of society, in particular all women and the youth, to set up their own democratic organisations and to govern themselves." When I visited Diyarbakir in the fall of 2011, I discovered that Kurds in southeastern Anatolia were indeed putting this program into practice.[1]

THE JANUS-FACED STATE

By 2004-5, then, Öcalan had either given up on or shifted focus from his effort to persuade the state to reform itself by democratizing from the top down. "The idea of a democratization of the state," he wrote in 2005, "is out of place." He had concluded that the state was a mechanism of oppression – "the organizational form of the ruling class" and as such "one of the most dangerous phenomena in history." It is toxic to the democratic project, a "disease," and while it is around, "we will not be able to create a democratic system." So Kurds and their sympathizers "must never focus our efforts on the state" or

---

(1) "Kurdish Communalism," interview with Ercan Ayboga by author, New Compass (Sept. 2011), http://new-compass.net/http%3A//new-compass.net/article/kurdish-communalism .

on becoming a state, because that would mean losing the democracy, and playing "into the hands of the capitalist system."[1]

That seems pretty unequivocal, and certainly in accord with Bookchin's revolutionary project. Bookchin posited that once citizen's assemblies were created and confederated, they would become a dual power that could be pitted against the nation-state – and would overthrow and replace it. He emphasized repeatedly the concept of dual power, I should note, crediting it to Trotsky, who wrote, in his History of the Russian Revolution, that after February 1917, when various provisional liberal governments were in charge of the state, the Petrograd soviet of workers' and soldiers' deputies became a dual power against those governments; it later became a driver of the October revolution. Similarly, the communalist confederation would a counterpower, a dual power, in a revolutionary situation.

But Öcalan, in the same 2004 work (In Defense of the People), also sends a contradictory message about the state: "It is not true, in my opinion, that the state needs to be broken up and replaced by something else." It is "illusionary to reach for democracy by crushing the state." Rather, the state can and must become smaller, more limited in scope. Some of its functions are necessary: for example, public security, social security and national defense. The confederal democracy's congresses should solve problems "that the state cannot solve single-handedly." A limited state can coexist with the democracy "in parallel."[2] This contradiction seems to have bedeviled Öcalan himself, who admits in seeming exasperation, "The state remains a Janus-faced phenomenon." I sense that the issue remains ambiguous for him, and understandably so. Insightfully, he observes that "our present time is an era of transition from state to democracy. In times of transition, the old and the new often exist side by side."[3]

Bookchin's communalist movement never got as far, in practical terms, as Öcalan's has, but if it had, he would surely have faced the same problem. The concept of a transitional program, which Bookchin invoked in such occasions, may be useful here. He used to distinguish between the minimum program (reforms on specific issues), the transitional program (like Öcalan's), and the maximum program (socialism, a stateless assembly democracy). That distinction has a revolutionary pedigree – Murray used to credit it to Trotsky. It's a way to retain a commitment to your long-term goals and principles while dealing in the real, nonrevolutionary world.

---

(1) Ocalan, *Defense of People,* pp. 177, 24, 104, 177.
(2) Ibid., pp. 24, 106, 111, 106.
(3) Ibid., pp. 27, 178.

AMARGI!

In May 2004 Bookchin conveyed to Öcalan the message: "My hope is that the Kurdish people will one day be able to establish a free, rational society that will allow their brilliance once again to flourish. They are fortunate indeed to have a leader of Mr. Öcalan's talents to guide them."[1] We later learned that this message was read aloud at the Second General Assembly of the Kurdistan People's Congress, in the mountains, in the summer of 2004.

When Bookchin died in July 2006, the PKK assembly saluted "one of the greatest social scientists of the 20th century." He "introduced us to the thought of social ecology" and "helped to develop socialist theory in order for it to advance on a firmer basis." He showed how to make a new democratic system into a reality. "He has proposed the concept of confederalism," a model which we believe is creative and realizable." The assembly continued: Bookchin's "thesis on the state, power, and hierarchy will be implemented and realized through our struggle (...) We will put this promise into practice this as the first society that establishes a tangible democratic confederalism." No tribute could have made him happier; I only wish he could have heard it. Perhaps he would have saluted them back with that first recorded word for freedom, from Sumer: "**Amargi!**"

---

(1) Copy in author's possession.

WHAT KIND OF KURDISTAN FOR WOMEN[*]?

DILAR DIRIK is a Kurdish activist and a PhD student at the University of Cambridge. Her research focus is Kurdistan and the Kurdish women's movement.

AZADÎ MEANS FREEDOM[**]

"Azadî" – Freedom. A notion that has captured the collective imagination of the Kurdish people for a long time. "Free Kurdistan", the seemingly unattainable ideal, has many shapes, depending on where one situates oneself in the broad spectrum of Kurdish politics. The increasing independence of the Kurdistan Regional Government in South Kurdistan (Bashur) from the central Iraqi government, as well as the immense gains of the Kurdish people in West Kurdistan (Rojava) in spite of the Syrian civil war over the last year, have revived the dream of a free life as Kurds in Kurdistan.

But what does freedom mean? Freedom for whom? The Kurdish question is often conceptualized as a matter of international relations, states, nationalism and territorial integrity. However, freedom is a question that transcends ethnicity and artificial borders. In order to be able to speak of a Kurdistan that deserves the attribute "free", all members of the society must have equal access to this "freedom", not just in the abstract legal sense. It is not the officiality of an entity named Kurdistan (be this an independent state, a federal state, a regional government or any other kind of Kurdish self-determination) that determines the welfare of its population. One indicator of a society's understanding of democracy and freedom is the situation of women. **For, what use is "a Kurdistan", if it will end up oppressing half of its population?**

Kurdish women face several layers of oppression as members of a stateless nation in a largely patriarchal feudal-Islamic context, and hence struggle on multiple fronts. While the four different states over

---

which Kurdistan is divided display strong patriarchal characteristics, which oppress all women in their respective populations, Kurdish women are further ethnically discriminated against as Kurds and are usually members of the lowest socioeconomic class. And of course, the feudal-patriarchal structures of Kurdistan's internal society restrict women from living free and independent lives as well. Domestic abuse, child and forced adult marriage, rape, honor killings, polygamy, i.e. are often regarded as private issues, instead of problems that require societal engagement and active public policy. This odd distinction between the public and the private has cost many women their lives.

Kurdish men are often very outspoken against ethnic and class discrimination, but many return home from protests and don't reflect on their own power abuse, their own despotism, when they issue violence against women and children in their "private" lives. The widespread prevalence of violence against Kurdish women, and frankly, women everywhere in the world, is a systemic problem - thus, the solution requires political measures.

THE WOMEN'S ISSUE??

The situation of women is not a "women's issue" and therefore must not be dismissed as a specific, private issue that interests women only. The question of gender equality is in fact a matter of democracy and freedom of all of society; it is one (though not the only) standard by which the ethics of a community should be measured. Since capitalism, statism, and patriachy are interconnected, the struggle for freedom must be radical and revolutionary - it must regard women's liberation as a central aim, not as a side issue.

Even though Kurdish women have a long history of fighting for national liberation, alongside with men, they have often been marginalized even in these liberation movements. While majoritarian feminists in the four states over which Kurdistan is divided often exclude Kurdish women from their struggle (by expecting them to adopt the nationalist state doctrines or by patronizing them as victims of a primitive, backward culture), male-dominated chauvinist Kurdish parties with very feudal, patriarchal structures, whose understanding of freedom does not move beyond primitive, empty nationalism, often silence women's voices as well.

Claiming that Kurdish women have always been stronger and more emancipated than their neighbors (and historical sources seem to imply this), should not be used as an excuse to stop fighting for Kurdish women's rights. Though the remarkability of Kurdish women

in history in all four parts deserves acknowledgement, the many terrible manifestations of cruel violence against women illustrate the realities on the ground and should serve as a reality check. **If Kurdish women enjoy a relatively high political status nowadays, this is a result of constant, multi-front struggle on the Kurdish woman's part, not a given condition, inherent to Kurdish society!**

The participation of women in liberation struggles or revolutionary ambitions is not uniquely Kurdish. In all kinds of contexts, women have often played active parts in the fight for freedom. Wartime, uprisings, social unrest often provide women with space to assert themselves and to demand representation in ways that normal, civilian life would not permit. Their engagement in social responsibilities, whether this be participation in the labor force, political activism or active militantism, often legitimizes their demands for emancipation. However, once the crisis situation is over, once "liberation" or "revolution" is perceived to be achieved, a return to previous antebellum normalcy and conservatism is often deemed necessary to reestablish civil life. This often constitutes the rearticulation of traditional gender roles, which are in turn detrimental to the newly gained status of women. Unfortunately, it is quite a common phenomenon that women suffer a backlash in their rights "after liberation", "after the revolution", "once our land is free", even if they were vibrant actors during the struggle. The hope that once the overarching goal of general "freedom" is achieved, everyone in the society will be free, has proven to be wishful thinking - women from the USA to Algeria to India to Vietnam can confirm that. The most recent manifestation of this phenomenon is the status of women in the so-called "Arab Spring" countries. Though over the last years our TV screens were full of women, who protested against oppressive regimes, and who played core roles in the movements, the situation of women sometimes got even worse after the uprisings. This is due to the fact that while general dissent and disillusionment from the establishment often transcends gender, class, ethnicity and religion, it is clear that the ones who have the most to gain from rising up are women, the working class and oppressed minorities and groups. If social movements don't pay attention to specificalities, new regimes may just form new elites that oppress vulnerable groups in their own ways. The need for autonomous, independent women's organizations also resonates with the experience of struggling Kurdish women.

WOMEN'S MAP OF KURDISTAN

The region that has most commonly been termed as "free" is Southern Kurdistan. There, the Kurds enjoy semi-autonomy, have their own governance structures and are no longer oppressed or persecuted due to their ethnicity, as the Kurds in the other parts still are. The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) has in fact internationally been praised for having established an economically strong, relatively democratic entity, especially compared to the rest of the broken state of Iraq. By being contrasted to Iraq, the KRG establishment often finds legitimization, in spite of its deeply undemocratic internal structures. While the dominant actors are extremely tribal, autocratic, and corrupt, dissent is silenced and journalists are murdered under dubious circumstances. **The pragmatic KRG is friendly with regimes such as Iran or Turkey, which brutally oppress their own Kurdish population and even marginalizes autonomy ambitions of the Kurds in Syria. Interestingly enough, it is also seems to be the most unpleasant place for Kurdish women.**

It is interesting that the Kurdish entity that is most state-like, most integrated into the capitalist system, and which complies with the requirements of the local powers such as Turkey and Iran, as well as the international system, displays the least interest in women's rights and the challenge of patriarchy. This tells us a lot about the ways in which different forms of oppression intersect, but also about the question of what kind of Kurdistan can be tolerated by the international community.

Surely, one needs to take into account that South Kurdistan is a developing region, but though the government has many tools to somehow empower women, it doesn't seem to be interested to do so. In theory, one would expect the women in South Kurdistan to have a higher status compared to those in other parts of Kurdistan, since they live in a prosperous region governed by Kurds, where they are no longer persecuted because of their ethnicity. Even though the women in South Kurdistan suffer fewer layers of oppression, they are victims of the tribalist feudalism of the dominant parties, which seem to regard empty nationalism and capitalist growth as an adequate understaning of "freedom". Women in South Kurdistan are very active in demanding their rights, but the KRG often fails to implement its laws. Violence against women is an epidemic, even on the rise, yet the government simply does not do enough to fight it. In 2011/12, almost 3000 cases of violence against women were recorded, but only 21 people were charged, leave alone all the unreported cases. The few men who do get persecuted are often released soon again. Sometimes

the victims of male violence are even shamed and blamed for having "provoked" the men. Since punishment does not appear as a deterrent for male violence, the system perpetuates the oppression of women.

The lack of truly independent, non-partisan women's organizations is also very problematic. Many women's organizations in South Kurdistan are even chaired by men! Tribalist, feudalist politics undoubtedly encourage patriarchal attitudes that are immense obstacles to women's liberation. While tackling the expressions of violence against women seems to be on the rise, there is no systematic challenge to the patriarchal system as a whole.

Autonomous women's decision-making bodies are essential to achieving the representation of women's specific interests. A top-down approach to women's rights is often inadequate and reinforces patriarchy in passive ways. Grassroots projects seem to be much more effective to transform society: For instace, an independent documentary project on Female Genital Mutilation (which only seems to occur in South Kurdistan) has achieved a change in the law of the KRG. Sadly, FGM is still widely practiced without punishment.

It is important to emphasize that this is in no way a condition that is somehow native to South Kurdistan. The situation of women there is in many ways due to the lack of interest of the political parties to engage with women's liberation. It is a conscious political choice of the male-dominated parties. It does not have to be like that!

The notion of "Now that we have a 'free Kurdistan', let's not criticize it too much" seems to be quite common, even though it is detrimental to a genuine understanding of democracy and freedom for all.

Demanding the persecution of violence against women and more representation of women's interests in the public sphere does not mean that women are "not loyal to the state". Such a patriarchal state seems hard to be loyal to. Women need to cross partisan affiliations and actually develop into a women's movement, beyond small NGOs. Women of South Kurdistan should not settle for any less, especially since they have more tools, mechanisms, and resources to work towards a more egalitarian society than Kurdish women in other parts have available.

Even women in rather left-wing, socialist Kurdish parties have made the experience that, without autonomous women's bodies, their voices will be silenced in the patriarchal Kurdish society. Though the Kurdistan Workers Party, PKK, is prominent for the many powerful women within its ranks and its active commitment to women's

liberation, things were not always as easy for women in the PKK guerrilla. In the 1980s, the demographic make-up of the PKK, which initially started out within socialist university circles, was challenged, when many people from the less educated, rural, feudal areas of Kurdistan joined the mountains after their villages were destroyed by the Turkish state. Most of these people were not exposed to ideals such as socialism and feminism and hence pursued nationalism as primary motivators in their national liberation fight. At that time, many women in the guerrilla struggled to convince their male comrades that they are equal comrades. The negative experience of the fierce war of the 80s also neglected educational elements of the guerrilla training, since the war was more urgent, but it made these women realize one thing: We need autonomous women's organizations!

The PKK and parties that share the same ideology managed to create mechanisms that guarantee women's participation in the political sphere and further challenge the patriarchal culture itself. The PKK ideology is explicitly feminist and makes no compromise when it comes to women's liberation. Different from other Kurdish political parties, the PKK did not appeal to feudal, tribal landlords to achieve its aims, but mobilized the rural areas, the working class, youth and women.

The strength of the resulting women's movement illustrates that the point in establishing structures such as co-presidency (one woman and one man sharing the chair) and 50-50 gender splits in committees on all administrative levels is no mere tokenism to make women more visible. The officialization of women's participation gives women an organizational back-up to make sure that their voice will not be compromised and it has actually challenged and transformed Kurdish society in many ways. This in turn led to the vast popularization of feminism in North Kurdistan. The women's struggle is no longer an ideal in high-ranking elite activist circles, but a prerequisite for the national liberation struggle. Male dominance is not accepted in these political circles, from the top administrative levels, down to local communities on the grassroots. This was achieved through the establishment of autonomous women's bodies within the movement.

Even though there are still many issues regarding violence against women in North Kurdistan, the focus on gender equality as a measure for society's freedom has in fact politicized women from young to old and has established an incredibly popular women's movement. Many Turkish women now seek advise from the rich treasure of Kurdish

women's experience. While Turkey now has a prime minister that encourages women to marry young, cover up and make at least four babies, and the three major parties in Turkey all have less than 5% women in their ranks, the Kurdish BDP as well as the newly established HDP proudly represent at least 40% women among their parties, explicitly focusing on women's and LGBT issues. The Kurdish women's movement itself criticizes patriarchy in Kurdistan most, while emphasizing that their achievements so far in no way indicate an end to the struggle.

Influenced by this stance on women's liberation, the dominant parties in West Kurdistan, Rojava, have adopted the PKK ideology and also enforce co-presidency as well as a 50-50 split in their political bodies. By enshrining women's liberation in all legal, organizational and ideological mechanisms of their governance structures from the very start, including the defense forces, they make sure that women's rights will not be compromised. Men with a history of domestic violence or polygamy are excluded from organiations. Violence against women and child marriage are outlawed and criminalized. International observers that visit West Kurdistan express that they are deeply impressed by the woman's revolution that emerged in spite of the terrible Syrian civil war.

At the same time, the recently established cantons in West Kurdistan firmly incorporated other ethnic and religious groups into their system as well. In the spirit of the "democratic confederalism" paradigm, as proposed by the PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan, they moved away from seeking a state as a solution, since they believe states to be inherently hegemonic establishments that don't represent the people. The dominant parties stress that they do not want to secede from Syria, but seek a democratic solution within existing borders, while including minorities in the government and giving women an equal voice in the construction of a "gender-equal, ecological, radical grass-roots democratic system", where different ethnic and religious groups can live as equals. The gains of the people in West Kurdistan have repeatedly been attacked by the Assad regime as well as al-Qaeda linked jihadist groups, who seem to be funded and supported partly by Turkey.

It is interesting to observe that the most state-like, wealthy, established and accepted Kurdish entity, the KRG is so inadequate at observing women's rights, while West Kurdistan, in spite of economic and political embargoes and the horrid war situation, does not seek nationalism or a state, but democratic confederalism as a solution and has already created so many structures to guarantee women's representation. The international community's preferences are highly

interesting in this regard! While the KRG is often praised as a role model for democracy in the region, West Kurdistan is completely discarded.

If the international actors that advocate themselves as believers in freedom and democracy in the Middle East would genuinely be interested in peace in Syria, they would have probably supported the progressive, secular governance project in West Kurdistan. But on the contrary, the Kurds were excluded from the Geneva II Conference in January 2014. Moreover, this partly happened with the support of the KRG, which helped marginalize the gains in West Kurdistan, mostly because the dominant parties there are – though not organizationally, but ideologically – affiliated to the PKK, the traditional rival of the governing party of the KRG.

The KRG's framework of progress, democracy, freedom, and modernity does not challenge the global capitalist, statist, nationalist, patriarchal system. That is why it seems to be the kind of Kurdistan that can be tolerated by the international community, while parties with the potential of upsetting the system are marginalized.

PATRIARCHY INTERNATIONAL

Recent events illustrate the gendered ways in which feminist ideologies of some Kurdish parties are being attacked. In his attempt to show that the is a friend of the Kurds, Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan invited the KRG's president Masoud Barzanî to the inofficial Kurdish capital Amed (Diyarbekir). Accompanied by singers such as Sivan Perwer and Ibrahim Tatlises, known for their opportunism and sexist feudalism themselves, a comedy of series of events was launched in Amed. The meeting was overall an odd attempt to marginalize the Kurds within Turkey, especially the PKK and the legal Northern Kurdish parties such as the BDP.

In a wedding ceremony, the two rulers blessed the marriage of a few hundred couples, all of which represented women in the image of the mentality of both, Erdogan and Barzanî. Almost all of the brides wore headscarfs, all the couples were very young. This assertion of conservatism in the name of "peace" illustrated the similarity of the patriarchal, feudal mentalities of the two rulers and their company. In attempting to marginalize the PKK, the two rulers in fact ended up marginalizing all Kurdish women. In this sense, this extremely conservative wedding ceremony was more of a conscious insult to the Kurdish women's movement than a display of happy coexistence of the peoples.

But is the business-like partnership between Barzanî and Erdogan even surprising? Turkey does not have a problem with the KRG or with just Kurds in general. The problem is one of ideology.

In the words of Selahattin Demirtas, co-president of the Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party: "If we had wanted to, we could have created ten Kurdistans already. It is not important to have a state called Kurdistan, what matters is that we have a Kurdistan with principles, with ideals".

The attitudes of local powers such as Iran and Turkey, who have traditions of oppressing their own Kurdish populations, as well as the behaviors of international powers show: a Kurdistan that is willing to cooperate with these regimes, which maintains economic business ties to these states and which is willing to marginalize more radical Kurdish parties for its own opportunism can very well be tolerated by the international community. A structure such as the KRG's, which is compatible with the framework of the dominant system is accepted, while political parties that challenge the capitalist, feudal-patriarchal statist system are ostracized. This asymmetrical preference of the international community exposes its true undemocratic face. And Kurdish women experience all of this on their own bodies.

FEMINISM MEANS FREEDOM

In order for Kurdistan to be a genuinely free society, women's liberation must under no circumstances be compromised. Criticizing the Kurdistan Regional Government's failure on the part of women, freedom of the press, etc. does not mean that one "divides" the Kurds. What kind of society will South Kurdistan be, if people are taught not to be critical in the fear of losing what has been achieved through so much loss? Shouldn't people be critical, even if that means standing up against one's own government? Isn't that the very essence of democracy? Don't we owe that to all the people who died to construct a society worth living in? Settling for less, for the sake of maintaining the status quo, is freedom in the most abstract sense possible. Certainly, the women of Kurdistan, who struggle on a daily basis, deserve more than that.

Nationalism, capitalism, statism have been the supporting pillars of patriarchy and often used women's bodies and behaviors to control societies. The bar of freedom has become quite low in the global capitalist, statist system in which we live in. Hence, it seems to be rather tempting to be satisfied with the KRG, given that it has become a fortress of capitalist modernity. Though, in copying the flaws and

shortcomings of the rest of the world, the KRG limits its understanding of freedom immensely. Therefore, women should not expect liberation through a state-like hegemonic structure. The moment we start to define the fact that there is a Miss Kurdistan beauty pageant in South Kurdistan as progress and modernity, we fall for the exact same mechanisms that have enslaved humanity in the first place. Is this what we understand as freedom? Unlimited consumerism? Primitive nationalism? Copying elements of global patriarchy and capitalism, labelling them with Kurdish flags in order to praise ourselves as modern?

Freedom is not to be found in Turkish hotels, Iranian investments, American food-chains, foreign sponsored beauty pageants or in traditional Kurdish clothes. Freedom does not come once we can freely say the word Kurdistan. Freedom is a never-ending struggle, a process of building an ethical, equal society. The real work starts after "liberation" has been achieved. "Azadî" must be measured by the liberation of women. **What use is a Kurdish state, if it will perpetuate rape culture, feminicide, the age-old disease of patriarchy? Are rape apologist, sexist Kurdish governors and official bodies really that much different from oppressive state structures, even if they wear our traditional clothes?**

"Kurdistan" itself does not equal freedom. A patriarchal Kurdistan is a more insidious tyrant than the usual oppressors. Colonizing and subjugating half of one's own community in a sexualized manner, one's intimate partners can be a much more shameful and violent act than foreign invasion.

Hence, Kurdistan's women must be the vanguards of a free society. It takes courage to fight oppressive states, but sometimes it takes even more courage to stand up against one's own community. **For, it really isn't a mere Kurdish governance, even a state, that is dangerous to the dominant system. A much bigger threat to the hegemonic structures is a politically active, conscious Kurdish woman.**

POST-CAPITALISM:
NOT ONLY HERE, NOT ONLY NOW

Krzysztof Nawratek is Master of Architecture and MA Architecture programme leader at the School of Architecture, Design and Environment, Plymouth University, United Kingdom. He was a member of the Board of Experts European Prize for Urban Public Space 2012 and 2014; a member of the selection panel for the Polish contribution to the International Architecture Biennial in Venice in 2012 and in 2014. Krzysztof Nawratek is an urban theorist, author of City as a Political Idea (Plymouth, University of Plymouth Press, 2011), Holes in the Whole. Introduction to the Urban Revolutions (Winchester, Zero Books, 2012), Re-Industrialisation and Progressive Urbanism (ed. New York 2015), Architecture and Urbanism of Radical Inclusivity (ed. Barcelona 2015) and several papers and chapters in edited books.

It's almost impossible to imagine a local, anti-capitalist revolution. It can be all or nothing, because in the globalised world, capitalism is the hegemonic system. With global revolution deemed unthinkable, we flatly refuse to believe in any possibility of change.

CAPITALISM AS A REDUCTION[*]

To even begin considering the post-capitalist world, we need to answer a fundamental question: what is the difference between capitalism and non-capitalism? In my view, the easiest and the most convenient way would be to assume, that **capitalism is based on production of hierarchical relationships of domination and subordination. Those relationships are primarily guaranteed by the reduction of the ways in which the actors of the socio-economic environment communicate (and therefore justify their own existence) to the language based on the logic of profit.**

In this context, a free market is a some kind of abstraction, which on the one hand has claims to universality and on the other hand, it drastically reduces the context. The free market is not evil in itself, it's the violence that excludes from it all elements questioning quick and easy profits for groups and forces dominating a given environment. **Capitalism is thus a reduction, a rejection of the context and consequences of economic activities. It accumulates power-over**

---

[*] Subtitles, asterisk footnotes and emphasised text – by editors.

(domination) but not necessarily power-to (agency). This distinction is – in my view – of paramount importance for the project of the post-capitalist world.

STATE VS. CAPITALISM

The current Greek minister of finance, Yanis Varoufakis, in his text „How I became an erratic Marxist" published in The Guardian[1] reminds us, that the integral part of human work is freedom, and it is that freedom that allows for creativity and in turn, the production of values. Capital is committed to the total commodification of work, but if it were to succeed, freedom would disappear. The fully commodfied work would become mechanical reproduction. Absolute capitalism would mean its own destruction.

Varoufakis shifts the focus from equality to freedom, but it is important to note, that this freedom implies the existence of the exterior to the capitalist domain. The exterior, understood as some kind of a „free remnant". To understand how inhomogeneous hierarchical systems produce the free remnant, I will introduce the term „negative autonomy". This is how I will be defining the actions performed by the subordinated structure to fulfil the tasks assigned by the structure of a higher order. However, **there is always some kind of void between what is demanded by the higher structure and the actual work performed by the structure of the lower order.**

That void is freedom mentioned by Varoufakis. This is the free remnant allowing for rebellion, for revolution or simply – innovation. From this perspective, the mechanism of hierarchical orders contains a hidden, un-revolutional possibility of social change, even in a hostile economic, political and social environment. But most importantly – to assume this perspective is allowing us to break free from the delusion of the homogeneity of global capitalism. It is then the hierarchy itself that contains the seed for the revolution.

Here and now, in the European context, two paths emerge for those who are looking to determine their own destiny. There is a Hungarian model, which is an attempt to establish a kind of national neo-liberalism within the European Union, and probably not totally consciously referring to models tested in South Korea and to some extent, China. The Hungarian model doesn't question capitalism, it doesn't even challenge its neoliberal version, it only challenges the

---

(1) http://www.theguardian.com/news/2015/feb/18/yanis-varoufakis-how-i-became-an-erratic-marxist

unlimited freedom of the global capital to operate in its territory. Its free remnant is used to attack foreign, non-Hungarian capital, and political opponents as well as those who don't fit into this vision of the new Hungarian capitalism – the poor.

A slightly different path was chosen by the Greeks under the leadership of the newly elected left-wing government. Like Hungary, Greece doesn't reject the reality of capitalism, even if the dream is to overcome it in the future, it is trying to – or at least seemingly so – to create conditions in which the post-capitalist society will be able to emerge and grow. Brutally aggressive conditions imposed on the new Greek government by the European institutions leave very little room for manoeuvre, however, the free remnant exists and SYRIZA government seems to be looking for ways how to use it to build institutions of a society based on solidarity and empathy.

A NON-STATE POST-CAPITALISM?

The belief in the possibility of building a post-capitalist condition in the 'cracks' of the existing capitalist system is not new – a similar mechanism was described by Edward Abramowski[1], who in cooperation saw a force capable of abolishing both capitalism and the state. Both Hungarian and Greek models assume weakening of the global capitalism in the context of strenghtened national state, therefore a question of a third path emerges. A path that could be chosen when institutions of the state are beyond control of the anti-capitalist forces.

It is a fundamental issue because it relates to the possibility of building a post-capitalist society in a hostile environment at any scale. If we assume that the capitalist state – at least in theory – can create a kind of a special zone in order to experiment with post-capitalist economic models (to some extent based on the reversed mechanism used by the Communist China in Special Economic Zones), then it would only be possible in the state where the government would be capable of challenging the capitalist status quo. This is the model, that perhaps we will be able to observe in Greece and possibly in Spain.

At the moment, however, the most interesting attempts of searching beyond global capitalism are happening in the Middle East.

Little is known about the economic system within ISIS, but it seems to be a kind of cancerous form of capitalism based on pillage and destruction. People living in Syria territories controlled by ISIS still

---

(1) http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edward_Abramowski

use the infrastructure supplied by the Syrian state, moreover, some income there is paid directly by the Syrian government in Damascus! So if ISIS is a cancerous tissue of global capitalism, the Autonomous Region Rojava is an attempt to build inclusive, non-capitalist social institutions. This heroic experiment is directly inspired by Abdullah Ocalan and his concept of democratic confederalism. The comparison with ISIS – as it may sound impropriate – is important because it shows two different ways of reaching beyond the established models of the state organisation. ISIS is based on pillage and exploitation, and only in a very limited way, it is capable of bringing about something new. **We don't really know what model of state the leaders of ISIS imagine, it's possible, as suggested by some, that they simply have no vision, as ISIS would be a tool for the apocalypse, an islamic version of the Jones sect, preparing for the end of the world.**

Ocalan's democratic confederalism – clearly inspired by Murray Bookchin's philosophy - has nothing to do with this apocalyptic prospect. It is set to build structures that will make this world a better place. **The one thing that makes the Ocalan's project so fascinating is its positivist[*] character. Ocalan allows for self-defence but renounces violence. This is not a vision of building on ruins but building on wastelands. Although inspired by secular thought, it contains an obvious link to the Christian tradition by bringing to mind the words of Jesus: 'the stone rejected by the builders became the cornerstone.' If ISIS is a parasite feeding on the crumbling and weak structures of Syria and Iraq, the project of democratic confederalism recognises the state as a structure constituted by the social diversity. In this view, the state is (a largely successful) attempt to translate diverse social activity and presence into a homogeneous language of citizenship, controlled by the state bureaucracy.**

From this perspective, and in the light of the Ocalan's thought, ISIS is the most repulsive form of state. If Hegel saw in bureaucracy a universal platform that allows the social multitude to exist and communicate, the project of democratic confederalism rejects any transcendence and assumes communication without intermediaries. It leads to a model of a radical direct democracy, very localised and fragmented. However, as demonstrated by the struggle for Kobane, also allowing for the adoption of the unifying ethical framework of

---

[*] "Positivism" here refers to a social movemeenet in Poland in 19th century. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Positivism_in_Poland

sister- and brotherhood, used for effective work within larger community.

AGAINST HOMOGENISATION

The Ocalan's thought opposes the homogenising force of state and citizenship. Subsequently, it is obvious then, that it automatically opposes all versions of fundamentalism. Fundamentalisms construct a simplified version of society and culture using fragments of the past and as a result they become extremely homogeneous. What Ocalan proposes, and what people in Rojava are trying to achieve, is the inverse of fundamentalism – not the rejection of the past (which is an exterior to the – at least - contemporary capitalism) but drawing from its richness and diversity. On the one hand, the democratic confederalism searches for spatial cracks to break free out of capitalism and on the other hand, using history, it roots itself in the time outside of it. This double – spatial and temporal – exit from capitalism seems to me a truly fascinating way of thinking. It is also one of the very few examples when the appeal to the past is not a part of a conservative narrative, on the contrary – the reinforcement for the present revolution comes directly from the past.

As I wrote above, the experimental model of Rojava is extremely important for all those who are serious about building (even if only as a theoretical model) post-capitalist society, but unable (or unwilling) to rely on the good will or conniving of the government.

It seems to me, that one of the key clues how to build such a society can be found in the manifesto of the The Kurdistan Woman's Liberation Movement (YAJK)

"Before everything women's ideology cannot exist without land. The art of harvest and the art of production are connected to women's artistry. This means that the first principle of the women's ideology is a woman's connection to the land it is born on; in other words, patriotism."[1]

DOWN TO EARTH

At first sight, these words might sound disturbingly similar to the idea of the return to the national community and perhaps the nation-state. However, nothing could be further from the truth – YAJK simply focuses on the support that every social structure needs to exist. To

---

(1) http://www.pkkonline.com/en/index.php?sys=article&artID=180

talk about the relationship with the land and production, it is to talk about the point of origin. It's about the need to find support, the need for a space where biological and cultural survival is possible. It is in my view very important and is a rejection of the postmodern Deleuzian fantasies of nomadic political subject. This spatial base is also the key element constituting the free remnant, allowing for the construction of the post-capitalist society.

The base space becomes then a common space, a shared 'plane', which is used – cultivated - by the members of the community. Again – the emphasis on the community as an entity composed of diverse elements, is only conceivable if the possessive relationship with the land is rejected, and the land is accepted as a multi-faceted entity that allows various groups to use it in various ways; the entity existing outside of now, submerged in the past and at the same time reaching into the future.

As I tried to prove, the extraordinary value of Ocalan's lays in the way he treats ideas such as time and space, often used by the reactionist theory and practice, and even fascist reaction. The way Ocalan responds to those ideas reveals their radical and revolutionary potential. It is an invaluable lesson for all those who dream of a better, post-capitalist world.

Plymouth, March 2015

CONTENTS